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## The Craft of Salvage: Robert Penn Warren's *God's Own Time* and Three Stories

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Allen Shepherd

"The story or the poem you find to write," Robert Penn Warren told an interviewer in 1977, "is the story or poem that has some meaning you haven't solved in it, that you haven't quite laid hands on."<sup>1</sup> In the 1930s Warren wrote *God's Own Time* and *The Apple Tree*, two unpublished novels, the meanings of neither of which he was then quite able to lay hands on or to render in properly answerable form. Although it was more commonly the case in the '30s and '40s that Warren's short fiction evolved into or was incorporated within his novels—"Prime Leaf" (1930) as the "germ" of *Night Rider* (1939) is the best known instance—in the case of *God's Own Time* (1932-1933)<sup>2</sup> the process seems to have worked the other way. From that novel, in what must have been a slow and patchwork job, Warren salvaged three short stories, published as "Testament of Flood" (1935), "When the Light Gets Green" (1936), and "The Love of Elsie Barton: A Chronicle" (1946).<sup>3</sup>

Association of the earliest and latest published of these stories with the novel has occasionally been noted, as in passing by John L. Stewart,<sup>4</sup> but never well developed. The connection with *God's Own Time* of the middle story, which is commonly regarded as one of the best of the fourteen collected in *The Circus in the Attic and Other Stories* (1948), has never been observed.

Because *God's Own Time*<sup>5</sup> is little known, some synoptic attention to its characterization, plot, and principal thematic concerns must precede examination of the processes by which the three stories were derived from the discarded novel, after which I wish to identify—or perhaps, more accurately, speculate upon—reasons for the marked superiority of "When the Light Gets Green."

Two women, Elsie (Barton) Beaumont and her daughter, Helen, stand at the center of the novel, where—despite their impenetrability—they evoke what seems at times disproportionate



interest from a succession of infatuated males. Elsie, however, has a history of the sort which in Charlestown, Tennessee, in the 1920s, places her beyond the pale. As a young woman she had been courted, then—without premeditation—raped and impregnated and subsequently married, not quite in time, by a handsome, feckless tobacco buyer named Benjamin Beaumont. Eleven months later he died of pneumonia in a Nashville hotel room, leaving Elsie to raise her daughter alone. His states of mind before the assault and after the marriage are suggested by the following passages.

He did not understand himself really, or why he came to see Elsie Barton at all.<sup>6</sup>

He fell into the former habit of self torture, and every time he touched her, which became more rare as time passed, the old distress, the loss, unfulfillment, hurt vanity, overcame him like a tide (IV, 10).

Such mystification and malaise are common to all of the characters whose minds Warren enters.

Helen, Benjamin and Elsie's daughter, has, as we are immediately told, "brown, soft, beautiful, unintelligent eyes" (I, 6); toward the middle of the narrative, Steve Adams, her classmate, the novel's principal point-of-view character and one of her forlorn admirers, concludes—quite accurately if somewhat defensively—that she is "a cheap and stupid girl" (VI, 10). Besides Mr. Griffin, her intensely neurotic high school principal, young Adams, and several other nearly anonymous pursuers, Helen is sought out by Frank Durrett, a vicious, sentimental, stupid man, war veteran and bootlegger and pistol-toting railroad detective, whose character and perception of his teenage bride-to-be come clear in the following observation.

He had never really intended to marry her. He had simply planned to ride her around the country in his big car, buy her sodas, candy and trinkets occasionally, and seduce her (IX, 17).

Who seduces whom is a question.

It is substantially Helen's animal attraction and intellectual vacuity which initiate the novel's action. Since she has failed geometry and cannot graduate without it, Helen is assigned Steve as a tutor by Mr. Griffin, who for the first two chapters threatens to become the protagonist of *God's Own Time*. Though—fortunately for him—Griffin is frustrated in his desire to marry



Helen and is in addition humiliated by Durrett and alienates Steve Adams, he will in future years "look back," Warren writes, "with a unique wistfulness on this very period in Charlestown as the time when he had been, if ever, somehow freely and completely himself" (I, 12-13). To be free and oneself, to achieve definition in the vacancy of life, is the deepest desire of all the characters capable of even passing reflection.

The consistently foul, rainy weather in the novel, which produces sodden, disappearing landscapes, hot, airless interiors, and damp, uncomfortable people, intimates the difficulties of establishing any ties which bind or support the characters in their quest. Of Elsie Barton it is said, as it might be of the generality of the novel's characters, "She felt that all of them possessed a secret that would never be hers" (IV, 4).

Variations on the theme of disconnection dictate familial arrangements and the construction of extensive and overinsistent parallels among the characters. Thus, for example, Steve Adam's father Thomas lost Elsie to Benjamin Beaumont; in like fashion Steve loses Helen to Frank Durrett. For Helen's future as Mrs. Durrett, one can imagine only a recapitulation of her mother's as Mrs. Beaumont. Mr. Griffin is humiliated by Frank Durrett over a letter which he as high school principal had written to Elsie concerning Helen's disgraceful conduct, and Steve, Helen's geometry coach, is beaten up in a fight with one Alec Snodgrass (of whom more later) over Snodgrass's insulting references to Helen's carrying on with Durrett.

The climax and conclusion of the novel are precipitated by two break-ins committed in Charlestown, one of a store and the other of two railroad boxcars. Although an ex-convict and small-time moonshiner named Morris Ardmore is arrested and tried for the crimes, Steve Adams has good reason to suspect two high school classmates—Jim Hawks, whom he likes and admires, and Alec Snodgrass, whom he does not. Steve's father, an attorney, has observed part of Ardmore's trial, which Warren dramatizes with a skill anticipatory of his depiction of Bunk Trevelyan's trial in *Night Rider*.

Chapters 10 and 11 of *God's Own Time* bring a falling out between Hawks and Snodgrass, Hawks having whipped Snodgrass after Snodgrass had beaten up Adams. Although Steve had divulged a part of his guilty knowledge to his father, it takes a vengeful letter from the aggrieved Snodgrass, who has run safely



off to Indiana, to the railroad detective, Durrett, to bring on climactic violence. The scene is the depot, and gathered for the occasion are Durrett, with a large pistol; Mr. Griffin, who has come to post his weekly letter home; Steve Adams, who in unlikely fashion happens to wander by; and Jim Hawks, who has come in for a drink. Durrett makes his arrest speech, Hawks moves suspiciously, though only to pay for his drink before being taken off to jail, and Durrett kills him on the spot. At novel's end we are left with the "shining eyes" of Helen Beaumont Durrett and with Steve Adams, of whom it is said,

He wept softly and deliciously, as though at something too full of beauty and pathos, feeling, in fact, as though he himself were dead and his true being, lifted into another sphere, looked back upon the body [his own] on the bed and wept (XI, 11-12).

However truncated the preceding account of *God's Own Time*, it is probably apparent that it is both highly episodic in structure and notably handicapped in the person of its protagonist, Steve Adams. Some further qualities of this protonovel, several of which recur in two of the stories, may be briefly sketched. Elsie and Helen are less creatures of mystery than simply dense and half alive. One is hard pressed either to know or to care what they feel or think. Their debility places an excessive interpretive, reflective burden on both the author and their admirers; Steve Adams, in particular, is much given to ill-focused, adolescent, Andersonian wondering. There is often evident a felt strain of over-analysis, of extended attention given to characters' states of mind which either do not yield readily or at all, or which, when plumbed, do not reward investigation. Characters insistently ask themselves why they feel or act as they do, which has the effect of making them appear excessively neurotic. One thinks of *Winesburg, Ohio*.

Plotting, as in chapters 10 and 11, tends to be somewhat mechanical, while earlier the narrative eddies rather than flows. The novel is not well constructed; Warren cuts frequently—and sometimes confusingly—from character to character, place to place, time to time. It is not consistently clear whose story the novel is; it appears at first to be Griffin's, then Steve Adams's, then his father's, finally, once again, Steve's. All of this is to say that while *God's Own Time* lacks the artistic unity of a well constructed novel, it did offer—through the regroupings of some of its parts—



the makings of a number of short stories. It is to an examination of this process that we must now turn our attention.

Judging from the dates of publication of the three stories salvaged from the novel (1935, 1936, 1946), it seems likely that Warren must have gone back over his manuscript several times. Thus, despite dates of publication, "Testament of Flood" (1935) is actually a narrative continuation of "The Love of Elsie Barton: A Chronicle" (1946). "Testament," only a little over six pages long, derives from passages scattered through chapters 2, 3, 5, and 7 of *God's Own Time*, sometimes word for word, sometimes with minor revisions. For example, from chapter 2 of the novel:

So dry, so withered, she [Elsie Barton] appeared that Steve Adams, meeting her in the street, found it hard, sometimes, to believe her the subject of the comment and recapitulation which the ladies who came to see his mother made in their guarded or captious voices (II, 1).

This is the beginning of "Testament of Flood":

So dry, so withered, she appeared as she went up and down the street that the boy, meeting her, could scarcely believe her the subject of those narratives inconclusively whispered now and then by ladies who came to see his mother.<sup>7</sup>

Into the story from the novel Warren transplanted Steve Adams, his mother, Elsie Barton Beaumont, Helen Beaumont, Mr. Griffin, Frank Durrett, now called Barber (as he was originally in the novel), and, in a minor role, a girl friend of Helen's, Sibyl Barnes. In an apparent effort to give his very short narrative a measure of conclusiveness, Warren undertook some strategic changes in his principal characters. Helen, for example, is made marginally more perceptive, as is evident when "he [Steve Adams] found her gaze, mild and satirical, directed at him" (p. 165). A satirical gaze is beyond the Helen of *God's Own Time*. Steve suffers many of the same agonies as in the novel: from the glowing, then hot, then cooling stove in the school room, emblematic of his changing feeling for Helen, from hopeless jealousy of Frank Barber, from a "filthy wart," and from terrible adolescent self-consciousness. In the story, however, he is provided with a literary sophistication unknown to his antecedent, which enables him to close "Testament of Flood" with a bittersweet gesture, as he applies a textbook



passage from Webster's *Duchess of Malfi* to the prospective fate of Helen Beaumont.

In making his story Warren did what he could with snippets of four chapters from his novel, literally or metaphorically cutting and pasting, but at least partially because of its size, because he reduced characters important in the novel to one-dimensional presences, the story impresses primarily as a vignette, a mood piece of adolescent angst.

In marked contrast to "Testament of Flood," the second published story, "When the Light Gets Green" (1936), is one of Warren's very best.<sup>8</sup> One can only speculate why this is so, but two reasons suggest themselves. The first, unlikely to be controverted, is that "When the Light Gets Green" derives from four consecutive pages of one chapter of the novel, chapter 7. The germ of the story, then, has an integrity and coherence lacking in the scattered bits and pieces productive of "Testament of Flood." What one imagines to be an at least equally significant reason for the former story's superior quality is that the issues dramatized therein meant more to the author.<sup>9</sup>

The essence of the story lies in the familial relation and responsibility of grandson to grandfather; Steve Adams to his maternal grandfather, Mr. Scruggs, in the novel; the unnamed narrator to his maternal grandfather, Mr. Barden, in the story. Both old men, feeling themselves displaced and unwanted survivors, are dying; both require the confirmation of love from their grandsons. This is to say that in both novel and story the grandfather is one of the combatants in the necessarily uncomprehending and hopeless fight that love and pride put up against time and change. The other combatant, his grandson, suffers the guilt of having tried and failed both to feel and to speak the impossible love the old man needed to survive.

Although, as might readily be demonstrated, there are extensive and exact parallels of idea and wording between chapter 7 of the novel and the story, perhaps one climactic quotation from each will sufficiently establish the point. In *God's Own Time* Steve Adams comes home one day to find that his grandfather has suffered a stroke and is lying helpless in an upstairs bedroom.

When the old man on the bed spoke, Steve Adams almost fell out of his chair with astonishment and something else, a



kind of unreasonable fear. "Son," the old man said, "I'm gonna die."

Steve Adams thought that his grandfather was going to die . . . in fact, in his mind he was already dead . . . but he said, "No, grandpa!"

"I'm on borrowed time," the old man uttered in his croaking voice, like the voice of a man down a well.

Steve Adams tried to say, no, again, but could not; and the old man lay there, apparently waiting for an answer, with his breath dragging. "It's time to die," the old man said then, "nobody loves me."

The boy, gripping the chair with his hands, heard the words, and thought: *nobody loves him*. Then, under the compulsion which was not unlike pity, he burst out, the violence of the words astonishing him as though spoken by a voice right at his head: "Grandpa, I love you!"

. . . He exchanged glances with his mother, and he felt a surge of irritation and shame, as though she had overheard his words to Mr. Scruggs and had recognized them for what they were, a lie (VII, 12).

Compare this with the following more compact, first-person passage from "When the Light Gets Green."

When he said something, I almost jumped out of my skin, hearing his voice like that. He said, "Son, I'm gonna die." I tried to say something, but I couldn't. And he waited, then he said, "I'm on borrowed time, it's time to die." I said, "No!" so sudden and loud I jumped.

He waited a long time and said, "It's time to die. Nobody loves me." I tried to say, "Grandpa, I love you." And then I did say it all right, feeling like it hadn't been me said it, and knowing all of a sudden it was a lie, because I didn't feel anything. He just lay there; and I went downstairs (p. 805).

Not surprisingly, Mr. Scruggs, though a distinctly minor character in the novel, is vividly drawn; this is only to say that he offered much more potential for reincarnation in short fiction than did, for example, either Elsie Barton or Helen Beaumont.

In "The Love of Elsie Barton: A Chronicle" Warren makes a sustained effort to bring Elsie and Helen to life, with somewhat greater success than in "Testament of Flood." Well over half of "Elsie Barton," a nineteen-page story, derives from chapter 4 of the



novel, incorporated usually with minor modification. Aside from its greater substance, one reason why this later story is more effective than "Testament of Flood" is that Warren did not, as in the earlier story, simply preserve the novel's standard third person point of view, but instead developed a representative, anonymous, communal point of view reminiscent of that which William Faulkner employed to such good effect in "A Rose for Emily." Thus in the first two pages of the story, in which Elsie is being introduced, we read "no one who saw her," "somebody spoke to her," "nobody else had entered," "anybody passing," "they knew," "They would say," and "people said." Through such a preliminary round of fragmented, ambivalent observation Warren manages to engender some reader interest in Elsie's warped, passive, enigmatic existence, which he then proceeds to exploit in the ensuing chronicle. Though Elsie remains a troubled sleepwalker, without anything approaching Miss Emily's indomitable will, Warren does convincingly establish the numbing small-town claustrophobia of her stunted life.

Since extensive citation of parallel passages from novel and story would be redundant at this point, I want to focus for comparative purposes on a single sentence, the last in the story. First, *God's Own Time*, from the middle of chapter 4.

Then he [Old Man Beaumont, Elsie's father-in-law] went into the house, and they [Elsie and her husband, Benjamin Beaumont] drove off (IV, 9).

To end his story, Warren simply attached another directive, summarizing clause.

Then he went into the house, and they drove off into the enormous world which she would never understand (p. 162).

In the early '30s Warren was a beginner in fiction and his mastery of the novel form was shaky, notably as regards the development of structural and thematic unity. His attempt to salvage three stories from his discarded journeyman volume, therefore, was both a practicable and revealing undertaking. That with one exception, "When the Light Gets Green," the stories proved undistinguished reflects primarily the fact that Warren was still experimenting with the meanings implicit in the several narratives. What we see in this process is an early stage of what was subsequently to become Warren's customary artistic practice—



of reconceiving, that is, imagining anew, essential issues, often in a succession of genres—this evolutionary commitment widely recognized today as among the most aesthetically striking and intellectually engaging qualities of the Warren canon.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Floyd C. Watkins and John T. Hiers, eds., *Robert Penn Warren Talking: Interviews 1950-1978* (New York: Random House, 1980), p. 254. Hereafter cited as *Robert Penn Warren Talking*.

<sup>2</sup>The manuscript is deposited in the Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, whose curator, Mr. Donald Gallup, I wish to thank for his assistance.

<sup>3</sup>"Testament of Flood," *The Magazine*, 2 (March-April 1935), 230-34; "When the Light Gets Green," *Southern Review*, 1 (Spring 1936), 799-806; "The Love of Elsie Barton: A Chronicle," *Mademoiselle*, 22 (February 1946), 161, 282-90.

<sup>4</sup>*The Burden of Time: The Fugitives and Agrarians* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965), pp. 173 and 452.

<sup>5</sup>For his permission to quote from *God's Own Time* and for his responses to my queries, I am grateful to Mr. Warren. It should not be understood, however, that what follows bears his authorial approval.

<sup>6</sup>*God's Own Time*, Chapter IV, p. 5. Subsequent quotations from the manuscript will be identified in the text, as follows: (IV, 5).

<sup>7</sup>*The Circus in the Attic and Other Stories* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, n. d.), p. 163. Subsequent quotations will be identified in the text.

<sup>8</sup>In a letter to the present writer, 26 October 1979, Warren identifies this as the first story he wrote.

<sup>9</sup>For Warren's account of the issues, see *Robert Penn Warren Talking*, pp. 238-40, 250.